

## [Florida Squatters]

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Sectional description of

Florida Squatters

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FLORIDA SQUATTERS

Where the lower end of the Florida Ridge Section slopes rapidly to meet the sombre Everglades, there is a region where squatters, both native Floridians and emigrants from other States, have settled with their families. None of the squatters seem to know to whom the land belongs, and they are never required to pay rent. Some remain more or less permanently in one place, while others continually move about, or soon leave for other sections. The social and economic status of these squatters is common to small population pockets scattered throughout the State.

To the families choosing this section for home sites a variety of soil types is available. Part of the area is course white sand with a covering of scrub palmettoes, black jack oaks, and a tangle of vines. Other parts are hammock land, and support growths of pine and hardwoods; still other parts are swamps and bayheads around small lakes and streams. Of these three chief land types, the white sandy soil is least fertile. The hammock soil is rich in organic matter and supports good crops, and the dense growth of hammock trees affords shelter for the shacks of the squatters. The swamp lands or their edges seem to be

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preferred by most of the squatters, perhaps because of the [case?] with which water may be procured. This land produces fair crops, and is well adapted to growing cabbage, which is the general crop favorite.

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Most of the men and some of the women are excellent marksmen, and can shoot the bead off of a rattlesnake without injuring the skin, which has a small market value. It is no feat for them to “bark” a squirrel — to shoot the limb upon which the squirrel is stretched, killing it by concussion.

Hunting is an event in which the older boys also take part. They think nothing a remaining away from school to “go a-hunting with Pa.” Along with shot guns and rifles, the hunters carry burlap bags in which to carry the game. They hunt through the hammocks and swamp edges, and sometimes go deep into the heart of a swamp in search of raccoons and opossums. The hides of these animals are tacked upon the outer wall of the cabin to dry, and when prime they bring a fair price. This is a negligible source of income, however, as fur-bearing animals are becoming more scarce. Moreover, the squatters only occasionally have money for ammunition.

When they go “rattlesnakin” a slender light pole of considerable length is used for probing the large clumps of palmettoes and deep gopher holes. Not even the larger boys are allowed to take part in these hunts.

Fishing, like hunting, is a necessity rather than a sport, and is usually a family affair. They go in their old cars, or, lacking these, tramp through the woods to some pond or sluggish stream. “Still-fishing” is the favorite method. Long slender branches are cut for poles, and set firmly at the water’s edge. The fishermen doze on the bank and wait for a bobbing cork to announce a bite. It is said that summer 3 is the best time for fishing, and that the “trout” (fresh water bass) bite best when the red birds sing.

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The homes of the squatters are usually from one to ten miles from the highways, and can be reached by a rough dirt “grade”, or by dim woods' trails or footpaths. Although geographically near a few excellent highways and fair-sized towns, the lack of means of transportation effectively isolates these people, who live as remote from each other and other settlements as if they were separated by great distances.

Most of their dwellings are flimsy one-room shanties with heavy wooden shutters taking the place of window glass. Sometimes a small shed or lean-to adjoins the main room. In some cases, especially near the swamps, the habitations are merely palmetto-thatched huts with floors of rough boards or hard packed dirt. As a general rule little attempt to made at cleanliness and sanitation; the homes are filthy, and the yards or clearings are littered with an assortment of trash and tin cans.

There are some cases where an attempt to raise flowers has been made, and a few scraggly sinlias and marigolds bloom dejectedly. The fence of one squatter bears a morning glory vine with huge blue blossoms, and a trash pile in another yard is covered with a luxuriant gourd vine to which the squatter points with pride and says: “It jus come up there by itself and don't need no care a-tall.”

Almost every family, no matter how poverty-stricken, owns a shotgun which is kept loaded and hung upon the wall 4 out of reach of the children. [Wildcats?], occasional bears, and numerous rattlesnake fall prey to the squatters' guns.

While the sustaining occupation is agriculture, it rarely progresses beyond the garden patch stage, and is pursued without enthusiasm in a haphazard manner.

Sometimes the squatter men are seen tramping villageward clad in faded overalls and patched blue shirts, their heavy brogans kicking up a fine dust. Huge sacks of cabbages or other vegetables are slung over their shoulders, to be offered for sale or trade at the country stores. At times a squatter woman is seen walking through the woods on her way

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to some farm to work in the fields. Usually there is a baby in her arms and several children pattering along at her heels, or clinging to her skirts. She occasionally receives from fifty cents to a dollar for her labor, though more often she is paid in food and given a little extra to take home. Some squatters have tried sharecropping with negligible results. Other than the vegetables raised, their diet includes rabbits, fish, gophers, cabbage palm buds, and whit bacon and flour when they are able to purchase it.

The squatters living near the swamp lands seldom have wells, for it is an easy matter to dip the warm and reddish water from the pools nearby. The women or the older children usually take this task upon themselves, and with large wooden buckets and long handled dippers or saucepans, walk barefooted to the swamp pools. When the bucket is filled it is carried to a bench which usually stands outside the rear kitchen door 5 of the cabin.

Clothes to be washed are carried with tubs and board to the swamp's edge. Paths are also taken in the swamp pools. In the sandy soil and hammocks there are shallow driven wells topped with rusty pitcher pumps which make a wailing sound when the handles are worked. A large tin cup or can is always kept filled with water nearby for priming the pump, and it is a strict rule that whoever pumps must always refill the priming cup.

Most families live so far from roads that an automobile would be useless to them, even if they could afford one. The men who are employed on public works walk to the highways where they are picked up by trucks. A few families possess old dilapidated automobiles, which enable them to gather wood and sell it in neighboring communities.

Out among the pines of a hammock an entire family may be seen ranging in search of fire wood, with their old ramshackle car parked near at hand. These automobiles, are, old-fashioned touring cars with rusted topless bodies and no back seat. Frequently the front seat is replaced with boards or small boxes fastened securely to the car body. The squatters seldom go many miles from home on these trips, for the woods trails are risky for

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the old cars and gas is always a problem. The various members of the family always wear dingy worn clothes and go barefooted.

A saw is not a part of the wood-hunting equipment. The squatters find "lighter knots" and fallen branches of trees.

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They take along an axe for the larger limbs, partly rotted, that are easily broken up with several blows. As the pine knots and broken branches are found they are thrown into the back of the car. When a load is gathered, the children climb into the back and arrange themselves as best they can among the knots and limbs. Father and mother and perhaps some of the youngest children take their places in front and the homeward trip is started.

An atmosphere of lethargy [permeates?] the section and its people. The various families seldom visit each other. They occasionally attend church services when they are combined with picnic dinners. Parents seem to enjoy the school exercises in which their children participate. Most of the squatters are suspicious of strangers and resent interference and offers of aid. When government relief was first offered them, many refused it, believing the relief workers had some ulterior motive.

There is little sexual "immorality", and illegitimate children are rare. The greatest vice seems to be "gettin likkered up". Many small boys chew tobacco, and the girls and women use snuff.

Medical care is almost totally unknown. The squatters use patent medicines and primitive remedies. Wounds, sores, and stings are bound with a piece of salt pork "to draw out the poison". Headaches, which are prevalent among young and old, are treated by binding the head tightly with cloths. The [?] temporarily made medical attention available to many 7 of the squatters. Limitation of families has been heard of but most of the squatters feel that it is "agin nature" and therefore wrong. Some women who had given birth to as many as

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twelve children received a doctor's care at childbirth for the first time. Sanitation methods were also taught by [?] agencies, but little impression was made.

The children seem extremely interested in going to school and attend whenever possible, often with the most meager of lunches and sometimes without any food for the day. In solemn little groups they walk to the highways where they are picked up by school busses. They carry tin lunch pails and clasp their books tightly under their arms. At the end of the school day there is no shouting or laughter, and they alight from the bus and depart without bidding each other farewell.

The one event which arouses County-wide interest each year is the Fourth of July political rally and barbecue. The affair is sponsored by the Young Democrats of Highlands County, and is held in "The Grove" near the village of Venus. Located upon the west side of State Highway 67, the Grove is the site of all political rallies in the County.

An ideal spot for such meetings, the Grove is a natural park free of underbrush, and shaded with many huge old oaks. It has been furnished with long tables, benches, and a speakers' platform. Beef, pork, chicken, and turkey are supplied by the residents of Venus, and the Young Democrats furnish other foods, such as salads, bread, lemonade, and coffee.

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Several men who are considered "experts" supervise the barbecuing of the meats. Trenches, or "pits" as they are called, are prepared in advance, so that fires may be started July 3rd. The fires are made of oak and hickory, and are replenished until a mass of glowing coals is obtained.

The meats are then pierced with long pointed poles of hickory and oak, cut green from living trees so they will not burn. The ends of the poles rest upon the top of the pit, leaving the meat suspended in the center over the coals. The meats are turned slowly and basted at intervals with a special sauce, the recipe of which is jealously guarded as the secret of

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the men in charge. This hot, flavorful sauce is applied with a mop made of cloth tied to the end of a stick.

“[Gitten?] fixed” for the rally and barbecue requires several days of hectic washing, starching, ironing, and darning. Shoes are worn by all, if possible, even though they may be removed before the day is over. The night before the big day the children are scrubbed until their faces shine, and the little girls have their hair done in tight stiff braids.

At dawn, after a breakfast of fried bread and side meat, they start for the Grove. Some families walk, always in single file, with the man leading and the woman bringing up the rear. Sometimes a younger child becomes too tired to continue, and the father slings him over his shoulder like a sack of meal. The children are so scrubbed and starched that they are miserable, and the father, who wears a buttoned collar and 9 necktie, soon unbuttons his collar and pockets the tie.

[?] Grove the men engage in talk, laughter, and much hand-shaking; the women retire at once to the farthest ends of the Grove where they sit in serious groups with their children. They respond timidly to the voluble greetings of the political aspirants who seek them out. At noon the men bring them plates of food.

The squatters try to listen attentively to the political speeches, but become most excited when political arguments end in a fight, the highlight of the day's festivities. At night the Grove is lighted with huge bonfires, and after a few hours everyone prepares to leave. Political candidates and their friends offer to drive the squatters to their woods' roads and the offer is always gladly accepted by the weary families